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AUTHOR Louden, Allan
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the future of the National Debate Tournament (NDT)/Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) merger from a historical perspective. The paper speculates on "natural rhythms" of organizations for perpetuation and attenuation. Specifically, it explores the historical growth and retrenchment of Delta Sigma Rho (DSR)/Tau Kappa Alpha (TKA) and Phi Kappa Delta (PKD) as a model for the future of the current merger. It finds that Vectors of Goals, Competitive Demands, and Governance converge and diverge in "predictable" ways, suggesting good and bad times for the merger. (NKA)

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CAN THE "MERGER" EMERGE WITH MULTIPLE IDENTITIES?

June 12, 2001 - Lake Tahoe, NV

Allan Loudon, Wake Forest University

This essay considers the future of the NDT/CEDA merger from a historical perspective. It speculates on "natural rhythms" of organizations for perpetuation and attenuation. Specifically the historical growth and retrenchment of DSR/TKA and PKD is explored as a model for the future of the current merger. Vectors of Goals, Competitive Demands, and Governance converge and diverge in "predicable" ways suggesting good and bad times for the merger.

I am sure the panel and audience share with me the view that divining the future is an act of folly. I correspondingly understand this current look at the future of the CEDA/NDT merger is no exception. There is, however, some wisdom reserved to longevity. It remains a surprise, to myself mostly, that I have been involved for over three decade with debate (the more charitable construction is that participating in history imparts a certain, albeit imperfect, authority). It has been my experience that there are some enduring probabilities of organizational behavior and competitive pressures that, when examined through a historic lens, provide insight into how we expect the emerging merger to play out. Such an examination suggests avoidable pitfalls and subtle opportunities.

As we gather at Lake Tahoe to reflect upon the current state of collegiate debate I am reminded that organizational structures in the forensics inevitably change yet the overall ebb and tide does have a certain rhythm. It has been over twenty-five years since the first National Developmental Conference on Forensics¹ and eighteen years since the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics.² A major concern expressed in both conferences was the threat posed by the increasing fragmentation of the forensics community³. Correspondingly, a special issue of *Speaker and Gavel* conjectured on what debate and forensics would be like in the 1980s⁴. The articles in the 1980 *Speaker and*

¹ McBath, J. H. (Ed.) (1975). *Forensics as communication: The argumentative perspective*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook.

² Parson, D. (Ed.) (1984). *American forensics in perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics*. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

³ I recognize there have been other developmental conferences since that time (primarily dealing with individual events), but these were that last to comprehensively address forensics, and debate in particular.

⁴ *Speaker and Gavel*, 17.

Gavel repeatedly warned that fragmentation in forensics was threatening the viability of our activity. The arguments basically held that many forensics groups speaking as *the* voice of excellence threatened to leave little more than impotent fiefdoms.

As these conferences were held and articles penned the fissure between CEDA and NDT was beginning to accelerate. The honorary organizations DSR-TKA and PKD no longer provided the stability or the central competitive focus for debate. And there was yet a multitude of forensics organizations to be founded. The NDT was still the center of the debate universe, but the disenfranchised were leaving for a climate where competitive success seemed more feasible and philosophical beliefs seemed more welcome. The world of team debate settled into rival camps each reinforced with the self-assurance that they were finer, greater, larger, healthier, or at least “somehow” better.

Moves toward division are not inevitable however, and on occasion communities witness a coming together. I doubt many expected the voices to lower and accommodation to be so rapid, but we are now well into the most significant transformation of the debate community since the early 70s, a rare turn toward consolidation. The response to the association of CEDA and NDT among competitors and coaches has been nearly a universal affirmation.

The “merger” has, on balance been a good thing. It has revitalized many tournaments (and compromised others), it has allowed a more sane travel schedule for many schools, it has removed the suspicion and rhetorical recrimination the division engenders, it has, for the time being, saved competitive team debate from becoming too small to sustain “national” competitions.

WHY DID THE MERGER OCCUR?

Many would agree that debate has been threatened by shirking demographics. This complaint is not new but the level of participation in debate if measured by the 60s and 70s standard is appreciable. The reasons are many, selectively cited, and in most

instances simply a product of changing times. Nonetheless with fewer programs pursuing debate and a fragmented community even the strongest programs have felt threatened.

I believe the pressures associated with a smaller community are a major factor in the current redefinition of the debate world. Allow me to make some observations about NDT and CEDA that may be controversial to some.

NDT in the late 80s and early 90s remained fairly stable in participation. This “stability” was achieved less by the introduction of new programs or retention of “marginal” programs, than the expansion of the number of teams from a shrinking pool of institutions. While major tournaments remained viable and perhaps even more competitive than in the “good old days,” the community was feeling the pressures of becoming increasingly inbred. The celebration of depth (translation: “quality”) over breadth (translation: “mediocrity”) sufficed for rationalization in the short term, but the collective community was beginning to feel the pinch. The NDT community was ready to “welcome back” their CEDA friends.

CEDA, on the other hand, had basked in the self-assurance of two decades of steady growth but was beginning to experience the same competitive dynamics that produced an elite core in NDT. Institutions that had conquered the competitive challenge found themselves increasingly estranged from many in the community. Also, CEDA, faced with defections to Parliamentary and NEDA debate formats, and a travel schedule as insane as that practiced in NDT, was more in the mood for cooperation. Many in CEDA, especially the competitively strong, reasoned why not compete with those of like mind.

Simply stated, the merger happened *because* it served most programs interests. It was jump started by some wily politics that “surrendered” the topic selection process, but the underlying currents were in place.⁵

⁵ The development of computer list servers and subsequent interaction between previously non-talking communities also accounts for the pressures to merge and ability to negotiate information exchange.

The merger is a "done deal," taking place in a relatively seamless manner. Debaters have crossed that generation divide of four short years where they have no experiential memories of a CEDA vs. NDT world. So why is it, then, that the merger still commands attention and there is this lingering sense that it is hardly over.

One reason may be that bureaucratic structures exhibit continuance much like the half-life of nuclear waste. My prediction is that long into the future, long after the demands of competition have worked their corrosive ways, and even after the organizations have eclipsed any substantial purpose, the primary organizations will be around. It is possible that the administrative structures will fuse much like the membership has, but even in Reno I would not bet on it. As inefficient and redundant and anachronistic as that sounds there are upsides to hierarchical persistence.

Part of the reason lies in the fact that the pressures that produce competing organizations in the debate world are as persistent as the competitive urge. Absent a CEDA vs. NDT world we would create one.⁶ What follows is an incomplete but somewhat extended reminder of what happens with debate organization when viewed in a more extended time frame. I hope to subtly argue that the CEDA and NDT experience is foreshadowed in part by the 1940s and 50s version, Delta Sigma Rho (DSR)-Tau Kappa Alpha (TKA) and Pi Kappa Delta (PKD).

HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE: DSR-TKA AND PKD

Serious tournament debate began in the United States in the late 20s and 30s. Prior to that period schools sponsored one on one debates, often billed as the evenings entertainment. Simple logistics of the day dictated that institutions along the train routes became the venues. The organizational structure for the debate community was grounded in the literary societies within each institution. Most schools had two societies that sponsored activities with debate often being at the heart of the enterprise. Contact among

⁶ Some would argue that such a move is already well established with the popularity of parliamentary debate.

intercollegiate societies took the form of sponsored debates among rival schools.⁷ Tournaments only began to emerge when resources and transportation made possible for multiple schools to come together.

DSR and TKA organized shortly after the turn of the century in the Midwest (DSR in Indiana and TKA at the University of Minnesota). Students and faculty emboldened by new competitive opportunities were also feeling the limitations of local literary societies. Reaching out to others to build professional associations was the natural extension of the times but there was a selectivity in that outreach. DSR and TKA were typical in elevating their important and mission by practicing exclusivity associated with much of the honorary fraternity movement.

Students enrolled in modest Midwest institutions and young ambitious faculty (e. g., John A. Shields at Ottawa College and E. R. Nichols, then at Ripon College in Wisconsin and later of University of Redlands fame) were also interested extending debate as an extracurricular activity. Learning that TKA wanted first to organize Indiana and adjacent states and was not interested in "a small Kansas college" and that DSR only wanted to organize the one or two major institutions in each state and, as Ottawa was "a small college," was negotiating with KU.⁸ The "small colleges" were on their own.

Shields, Nichols and others were not easily discouraged and over the next few years an organization that would rival DSR and TKA was born, Pi Kappa Delta (PKD). PKD began slowly but with advent of the tournament age (late 20s, early 30s) the organization enjoyed robust growth adding chapters across the country. By the late 40s, 50s and 60s, fueled ideologically by debate's contribution to bolstering democracy and the backing of strengthening departments of speech, PKD became a central forensics organization. The height of PKD expansion came with the 1969 Convention (Arizona State Univ.) which was large enough that 187 chapters sent teams, were limited to three teams across categories, and sustained a championship debate division of 60-70- teams that allowed

⁷ It was around the turn of the century when intercollegiate events became common.

only one team per school who had a winning percentage of 60 % or more. The populist PKD eclipsed their rival DSR-TKA (the two honorary fraternities merged in the early 50s) in size if not prestige.

The DSR-TKA/PKD rivalry was long standing and demonstrates an evolution that echoes the pre-merger history of CEDA and NDT. They represented, with exceptions of course, elite vs. common, large school vs. small school, and haves vs. have-nots.

THE POST HONORARY ERA

DSR-TKA even though substantially outnumbered by Pi Kap schools retained more prestige because it was composed of the "more important" private and public institutions. The "separation" worked in a world of many participants and separate cultures, but eventually the elite system overwhelmed.

The National Debate Tournament began at West Point in 1947. For the first decade and half schools from PKD and DSR-TKA were nearly equally represented in the elimination rounds and the national tournaments and conventions of the honoraries, for a shorter period, were of equal or higher status. When the NDT in 1967 shifted from West Point to the American Forensics Association (AFA), winners were increasingly from relatively elite institutions. The honorary tournaments were at their height, but the future was to increasingly favor the NDT as the crowning debate achievement.

The AFA, NDT's host organization, appropriated the topic development and regulation for entry into "The" national tournament, moves that over time spelled the relative demise of the honoraries. This also was the time when a fledgling organization, founded in the West by Jack Howe, began to take root. Its initial purpose was to advance the cross-examination format and reinstate "educational goals" but over time assumed the role of PKD in the debate world, providing a populist expression, often a home for programs that were not positioned to year-in and year-out be competitive on the "national circuit."

⁸ Shields, J. A. (1963, March). *The Forensic*. Reprint in L. Norton (1987), *The history of Pi Kappa Delta: 1913-1987*.

What is arguably demonstrated with this short (and oversimplified) history is that two strains are ever present in the debate community. There is a competition driven aspect whose side effect is elitism based on resources and talent. A second current is also present, which provides competitive space and expression for a broad range of institutions and educational models. The more stable times in organizational evolution are when both strains are fully represented. The merger, while welcomed, may threaten this underlying balance of larger trends/needs in the community.

Competition is inherent and rightly central to debate. Does this necessarily produce elitism that in turn evokes counter-elite movements in debate? Perhaps so. One way of thinking about the pressures is the analogy of the debate experience with that of the national university system, a system often expressed as public vs. private models.

I recently heard a NPR story in which a spokesperson for state universities made the argument that it was they who were the *standard* in higher education. After all the vast majority of institutions are extensions of governmental units designed to serve particular constituencies, producing socially defined needs. It is not the public institutions, however, who typically are held up as the models to be emulated. The elite private institutions that garner the largest resource base wag-the-dog.

Having Yale and Princeton and their compatriots serve as the standard has some positive effects. It raises the standards, breaches new ground, but there is also a servitude to unattainable goals that are often inappropriate to the educational mission of a majority of the community. But comparisons are inevitable and most programs are judged as second-tier, as wannabes, as laboring in the "third-world" of academia. Similar judgments are silently made in forensics.

And therein is one of the most important reasons to maintain "separate" identities of NDT and CEDA. The question, of course, is can the current merger, overtime, accommodate

multiple identities? The next section outlines a few of qualities that CEDA and NDT, as presently experienced, bring to the debate activity.

ASSESSING CEDA AND NDT'S UNIQUENESS

My argument recognizes the value of residual hierarchies post-merger rests on the notion that CEDA and NDT have unique qualities, qualities grounded in distinct missions.

What follows is a partial listing of some of those differences.

What does CEDA uniquely do?

- *CEDA is the populist wing of the activity.* CEDA draws an important part of its identity from the "big tent" philosophy and as the exponent of for debate's educational value: inclusion vs. elitism, training vs. winning, service vs. autonomy.
- *CEDA provides constituent services.* CEDA is a multi-tiered organization that includes public outreach, committee driven missions, infrastructures of points, conferences, materials, and electronic sharing. It has largely subsumed many of the missions that in an earlier era would have been the AFA's responsibility, tailoring the product to the debate community. And it is constitutionally directed to promote debate as an academic enterprise.
- *CEDA directly influences the structure of multiple tournaments.* To be part of the point system CEDA tournaments must be sanctioned. Initiating changes that affect many, if not most tournaments, however, is a much more Byzantine process than NDT, often having to accommodate many more voices and taking more time. Being responsive to a more diverse constituency is not a negative of course, but it is more time consuming and often less concise.

What does the NDT uniquely have?

- *Resource rich programs provide stability to the activity.* As envious as we might be of those programs that seemingly have all the advantages, tearing them down is not the answer. In fact emulating their success is the preferred route. The "major programs" are the anchor that the community can count on to be there in the future years, to host the tradition rich tournaments, to provide the model/justification for other programs.

- *Competition is the bottom line.* Competitive pressures inherently drive the entire community, but structurally the NDT is only concerned with crowning a national champion. Some lament the "myopic" purpose, but they should not lose sight the competition is the engine that perpetuates the activity, motivates the students and coaches, and builds and maintains tournament venues; a model fundamental to achieving educational ends as well.
- *The mission is narrow.* The NDT is a special chartered committee of the American Forensics Association whose official authority is the administration and maintenance of one tournament--the NDT. Of course the moral suasion of that tournament is profound and the NDT reach far exceeds its literal charge. In the search for innovation and competitive access most tournaments (and increasingly the CEDA model) are subject to NDT's vision. The very simplicity NDT's structure--the ease in rule making--ensures its low-maintenance continence.

CONCLUSION: MERGER RISKS

The merger, while wildly successful in many regards, has the potential to compromise some of the features that distinguish the two groups. Instead of working for a full merger of organizational hierarchies we may want to take a more welcoming stance toward pre-merger institutional structures. The reason is fairly simple. Drawing upon the history of debate organizations and the characteristics of CEDA and NDT certain postulates may be advanced.

- Elitism tends to drive populism from the field.
- Competitive demands tend to overwhelm institution building.
- Tournament experimentation or regulation tends to conform to the elite national tournament model
- Resource rich programs tend to drive away less competitive programs

If these are even partially true, then maintaining organizations mandated to pursue variant goals is the best hope of accommodating the tensions. As an intentionally bifurcated community we can work toward keeping the missions of the two organizations clear and distinct. The healthy existence of *two* national competitions is essential to maintaining

the organizations' viability and virtues. Once one national tournament functionally trumps that other, the organizational structure will exist only in an atrophied state.

So, herein lies the rub: how can we maintain the participation by the broader debate community, while recognizing that the elite strains of the NDT (or it's equivalent) is an inevitable (and positive) presence? Will the very competitive pressures that honor the “winners” lead to reintroduction of separation pressures, muting the advantages of the current cooperation?

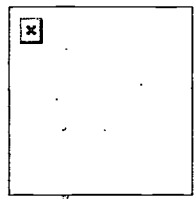
My solution is little more than adopting an attitude or point of view the welcomes the continuance of *both* a CEDA and NDT official structures. It likely is the only realistic mechanism that two distinct national tournaments can survive with sufficient prestige. Even though two tournaments are presently alive-and-well, left on their own under merged management the elite tournament would likely drive out its populist cousin. Having a national that celebrates openness *and* a national with traditions of exclusivity is, over time, a tricky mix. I hope this historical excursion provides some perspective on the potential future of the NDT/CEDA merger.

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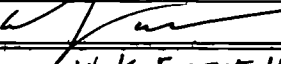
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